

White punks on revolution in MILESTONES

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MILESTONES is an overlong, three-and-one-half-hour, low-budget color film directed in a Cassevetes acting style in which actors of varying ability play both their scripted role and themselves. Taking into account the low budget, the film is technically unpolished but often cinematically audacious and fascinating. Taking into account the filmmakers' explicit intent of making a left film about the left, the film is politically uneven, inept, and often wrong and stupid.

An historical film about what has supposedly happened to the New Left, it concentrates on the character study of many young white radicals in their late 20s and early 30s. In its documentary aspect it presents contemporary persons who shared a common past in the late 60s radicalism and who now live apart and diversely in the world, but who generally fit the cultural or radical lifestyle segment of "the Movement."

The directors, Robert Kramer and John Douglas, offer this film as a mirror for our generation. It shows people who became adults in the civil rights/antiwar/student power/counterculture days that began about 16 years ago, the generation for whom the liberation of Vietnam was truly a victory. The title indicates what the filmmakers wish to present about their characters: significant events in their lives such as giving birth, getting out of prison, or losing lovers—and also the spaces in between, which are shown to consist of raising children, watching TV, working on a political project, or working a bit to pay the rent.

Douglas and Kramer choose to present their theme of lifestyle radicalism by using both cinema verite documentary and a scripted fiction which seems heavily improvised. The overall structuring idea is to present fragments of the characters' experiences, thoughts and

conversations. These are slices of their lives or milestones which make sense as they become for the audience a unified memorial experience. Often it's hard to figure out what is going on/has gone on in the film because many characters from different parts of the country who look vaguely alike and are not clearly identified interact, speak their piece, and seem to have lives that interconnect via a network of communal living situations.

Those of us in the audience who share an historical past with the characters not only work to make connections between people within the film but between the film and our lives. However, for those who see themselves as outside the historical "moment" of the characters' lives, the major impact of the film must be an "insight" into the psychology and élan of a certain lifestyle.

The film depends on close ups. When first seen, the characters' visual portrayal conveys little about who they are, what they do, or what their environment is. And the soundtrack is in no hurry to present that information either. The directors use the equivalent of a "sound close up"—isolated and intense fragments of sound sequences, usually conversations—to get us aurally close to events. In this way, the sound editing is original and inventive.

This "close up" technique appears at the start of the film with an elderly woman discussing her life. The camera follows her walking across an urban street; then we see stills of photographs from the turn of the century (from her life?). Seen in close up, she speaks to the camera as she sits in her apartment. Perhaps she is talking to a grandchild, but the listener and their relationship is not shown. The snatches of her long conversation make no sequential sense but come together as a Gestalt about the hard struggles of immigrant life.

At its best, the film's fragmentary organization conveys information in a casual way that itself makes a point. For example, two men are shown relaxing together in bed, and their love relation is taken as natural and ordinary, as it should be. In sane sequences, the unassuming and unstrained technique complements the action, as when some men get together for an afternoon of stoned fun in which they throw pots (one is a blind potter who has his own studio) and play music. The pots and music get worse as the afternoon wears on, but it doesn't matter, for the point was just the pleasure of getting together. The episode provides a positive picture of male relations as they develop with the weight of the content carried in the visuals.

Other times, unfortunately, the film depends on heavy-handed and obtrusive dramatic conflicts and on characters talking endlessly about their psyches and their souls. Such scenes—men deciding if they should live together collectively, a released prisoner trying to embrace nature in the Arizona desert, an attempted rape, a robbery shootout—are

supposed to convey heavy emotion, but actually look artificial and awkwardly acted.

MILESTONES tries desperately to express, people's feelings, their emotions. In the characters' psychic milieu, "the personal is the political" really means "emotions are me, emotions—any old ones—are equally valid politically." But what the film actually conveys is the characters intellectually discussing their feelings. We do not see people expressing emotion but talking about it, or about the difficulty they have with it.

Almost all the relationships presented in the film are ideal ones, not in the sense of perfect, but imaginary. We hardly ever see characters at work—at their labor, doing their jobs. Instead, they are seen constantly communicating and communicating in an almost perfect way. The film does not portray, as even Hollywood films take the trouble to show, the struggle involved as people try to get others to understand them. We are given the end results of people's interaction, not the process. Since both visually and verbally the filmmakers give us only truncated little segments of human relationships, and no indication of the characters' development and interaction over time, the people in the film come off as superficial and selfish.

Although life consists of contradictions and uncertainties, MILESTONES is filled with instant wisdom. In the film people keep arriving at those answers which we rarely find quickly in life. Not that the film doesn't show conflict and change: it does. It almost introduces a section with a title card: "And now we're going to show you a couple with conflicts." As the directors pretentiously explore "how hard it is" by showing us an arguing couple on a cross country trip, even these two seem to have between them all the answers they really need.

A literary contrast may be useful. In her novels *Going Down Past* and *Small Changes*, about similar characters in similar situations, Marge Piercy presents social situations from which the reader is forced to extrapolate a political conclusion. She gives the characters experiences within a specific social milieu and demonstrates rather than explains both their personal changes and her own political ideas. She shows the material conditions of the characters' lives and lets us judge the alternatives—both the characters and ours. However, Kramer and Douglas present lifestyle alternatives cut off from the material conditions that form people's lives. Although the characters in MILESTONES seem to talk endlessly and even shallowly about their lives and times, the directors in a rather insulting way, if you think about it, always underline their message and always tell us what to think.

The arguing couple, for example, have their biggest blowup in a barren interstate restaurant. By extension, by metonymy, their conflict is "explained" because they are in a barren situation. In fact, within the

story of the film, they have left the commune and they have “reentered” the real world. Kramer and Douglas’ message here is a trite one, left over from 19th century Romanticism: only by staying outside the corruption of mainstream life can people achieve an authentic spiritual existence and profound interpersonal communication.

Since the film never places its characters’ search for adequate lifestyle within the larger social and especially class context of U.S. society, in the end MILESTONES assumes that by living with, associating with, and caring about like-minded people, we can get out of situations in our society by changing only our own head. It perversely assumes that it is not only a good idea to raise free and liberated children, but that it is possible to do so. Friends in this film form a therapeutic community for each other. The close ups, and the fragments of conversation, fascinating as they are, are the visual equivalent of a political myopia which can concentrate only on interpersonal relations.

The world of MILESTONES is overwhelmingly bourgeois in both objective and subjective terms. Only one character is shown who is clearly in a working class environment: he’s been organizing in a Detroit auto plant for several years, he tells an old friend who’s visiting. But in this make believe dialogue we learn he has no friends (after several years?), that he has been doing industrial organizing as a total loner (a most bizarre notion), and that he’s all set to give up the whole thing on short notice to join a commune in California (so much for the workers). The other people we meet are basically petty bourgeois, college educated types—artists, professionals, and so forth—who have chosen downward mobility from their upper-middle class white suburban backgrounds. Although they may have renounced their class prerogatives a while back, they still retain that old reliable weltanschauung—and values to boot.

As a political film and as an account of what’s happened to the Movement, MILESTONES is finally a deeply and pessimistically dishonest film. These characters don’t have to work hard and boring jobs to support themselves and their kids. They face no hard choices, only difficult indecisions which they have the financial luxury to postpone. Thus, after a while the film’s intense concentration on interpersonal communication makes the very characters whom the directors want us to admire seem pretentious and shallow. They don’t have the survival skills and street smarts of the urban working class. They not only withdraw from the routine of the 9 to 5 world, but they seem to exalt and hide behind their psychological weaknesses, their crippled pasts. The film would better be titled ‘Lemmings.’

MILESTONES abdicates the principle of criticism and self-criticism, both on the part of the characters and on the part of the directors. The film doesn’t just deal in bad politics, which it does freely, but it is also

basically dishonest and reductionist in its presentation of bad politics. In real life, some people walked away from the Movement and some didn't. And the people we know who are into this kind of lifestyle alternative culture, if they had been left activists, are much more complex than the MILESTONES characters, much more uneasy with the choice, and much more committed to arriving at a more advanced political point. In terms of its content and the concepts it presents, MILESTONES flattens out the contradictory and multiple aspects of social, historical, and especially political process. Characters talk about "the struggle" and "the Movement," but nobody mentions specific struggles, specific organizations or actions, specific names and places. Characters theorize endlessly about their personal life, but there is no political theorizing in the film.

In visual terms, the film is interesting for the way it makes icons out of the New Left and the counterculture. But because the directors want to keep us inside the characters' experiences, the film lacks the radical political reflection on the cinematic experience itself that we can find in films like Godard and Gorin's *TOUT VA BIEN* or Jean-Luc Godard's *SPEAKING DIRECTLY*. In *SPEAKING DIRECTLY*, Jean-Luc Godard teaches his audiences a filmic lesson. He wants to make them politically self-conscious about film, to make them aware of the political implications of the types of images being used. Like MILESTONES, *SPEAKING DIRECTLY* offers a reflection on the political and cultural movement of the 60s. Yet Godard never reduces the complexity of the images he uses. When he does condense a multiplicity of densely interrelated factors and expresses them in a single flat image, he teaches us how to read that image in a complex and multilayered way. Or he takes what seem to be "simple" images from American society (TV news, a country road, maps) and opens them up in a witty way to a leftist political analysis.

In contrast, Kramer and Douglas doggedly refuse to ask what it means to make an icon out of the New Left, to create and manipulate a simplified and recognizable visual representation of it. Because they want to capture the spiritual experience of their social outsiders, they strive for that visual and verbal cinematic form which will express the character's social apartness and uniqueness in the most intense and extreme way possible. They want the viewers to live inside the images and the film.

MILESTONES is a lazy film; it doesn't work for what it stands for politically. It does not succeed at conveying what it intends to and it does not make any effort to get a political analysis across. There are vague references to Native American culture, and to slavery, especially in still sequences of old engravings of slaves bound and chained. Are these sequences supposed to be ironic? Are they supposed to represent the real sufferings of real people in U.S. history, and the legacy of Blacks today, as opposed to the circular wanderings and wonderings of the

film's middle class white characters? Probably not, for they are presented on a par with others dealing with acupuncture and natural childbirth. Without a political context, all we have is Rousseau's Noble Savage and woman as Earth Mother. By romanticizing politics and oppression, the film ends up being both racist and sexist. It doesn't examine the political causes of Indian and black resistance to oppression but rather proclaims, "Oh, how they suffered, and oh, how strong they are."

Similarly, we not only see a woman going through the travails of a long and arduous natural birth at home—with the victory of new life for the whole commune looking on—but we also see a sequence of an attempted rape, the two sequences being marked in melodramatic opposition as the "good" and "bad" aspects of women's existence, both still defining women primarily by their sexual roles. As the other sequences about Indians and blacks are ultimately racist, so these are sexist.

MILESTONES considers Indians, blacks and women with "sympathy," but without rigorous or rational analysis of their oppression and the steps that must be taken to overcome that oppression.

MILESTONES rests on one true observation—that personal life cannot be divorced from political life—but it inverts that truth and distorts it in a peculiar way. Rather than showing an integrated complexity of personal, private, everyday affairs and activist, public, political life, it tends to show a serial variety—factory organizing one week, rural commune the next. Most curiously, it never does show the one movement that has consistently raised the issue and acted on the politics of everyday life—the women's movement. Fine and strong women are in the film, but none of them articulate any relation to women's organizations.

Repeatedly, the people we meet in MILESTONES seem to be remarkably like the filmmakers, Douglas and Kramer—having enough money to afford the material luxury of dropping out to rural Vermont for several years, and then when they feel like it, dropping back into left politics. Organic farming one year, political filmmaking the next. Again and again the film implies that the characters are noble and good and attractive because they freely choose to be politically left wing. But wait a minute. What is left out? Well, for one thing that a hell of a lot of people don't have a choice about being politically active: they have to fight back at work and in their communities because no one's going to do it for them, and they don't have the option of splitting for a commune.

MILESTONES is in the last analysis basically elitist. It sets out a superior way of life that very few have the luxury of living as a model to be followed. The directors apparently assume we'll all be seduced by the vision and will mimic this example of the politically correct life. They

intended a rich, diverse, and epic film. What they ended up with was a monument to emotional and political self-indulgence.

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